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ABSTRACT

The current boom in magnet schools (or multiple option systems) draws strength from three converging trends in education in the last decade: (1) the search for appropriate educational options to meet the diverse learning needs of children; (2) the desire for greater parental participation in the educational process; and (3) the search for voluntary desegregation measures. The use of magnet schools or projects in the process of school desegregation still poses problems that are difficult to resolve. For example, one or two, or even several magnet schools, no matter how racially balanced their individual student populations, are not sufficient to bring about district wide desegregation. Magnet schools may also raise problems concerning the question of equity in educational services within a school district as a whole. It is also possible that magnet schools will not bring about equal educational opportunity and social mobility. For example, there is always the danger that less educated parents will not be adequately informed to make the best choices for their children, despite the availability of several options. However, positive aspects of the growing number of magnet schools and multiple option systems should be emphasized: (1) they respond to the need for alternatives to the standard curriculum in the public school; (2) they provide a wide variety of learning experiences to children; and (3) the multiple option systems legitimize diversity. (Author/AM)

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The Magnet School Boom: Implications for Desegregation

Constancia Warren*

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History

The current boom in magnet schools (or multiple-option systems) draws strength from three converging trends in education in the last decade: (1) the search for appropriate educational options to meet the diverse learning needs of children, (2) the desire for greater parental participation in the educational process, and (3) the search for voluntary desegregation measures.

There have long been private schools that provided an academic alternative for affluent parents, but the alternative schools which emerged in the 1960s were a reaction against the standardized structure and curriculum found in most American schools, both public and private. "Free schools" assumed two basic forms.

> One branch promoted the "freedom works" philosophy of A. S. Neill; another interpreted "freedom" as liberation of the oppressed. In the former case, free schools were settings in which the learner was in complete charge of his or her own learning. . . . In the latter group of freedom schools, on the other hand, the important lessons had to do with liberation struggle, the evils of a capitalist economy and political system and the like.[1]

While these schools were outside the public school system, and were often short-lived due to limited resources, they did expose both parents and teachers to a different view of education. In the late 1960s, special programs began to be implemented within the public schools. These were often "subschools" and tended to draw either disaffected white middle-class students who were turned off by the standard curriculum, or special problem students who could not function in the school and were gladly moved to a program in which they could not disrupt the learning of "straight" students. Very rarely did early alternative programs integrate students from different educational, socioeconomic, and racial backgrounds. An exception was the Parkway Project. It drew its students from a voluntary lottery to its "school without walls" and experienced early and exciting success with a diverse group of students, using the city (Philadelphia) as a classroom.

At first, alternative programs existed as "special" options within "regular" systems. The Berkeley, California, school system was among the first school districts to offer a variety of alternative educational experiences at both the elementary and secondary levels; and Cincinnati, Minneapolis, Dallas, Seattle, Philadelphia, and Boston are now among the major urban districts offering some degree of option in educational programs.

A second source of strength for multiple-option systems comes from the movement initiated in the 1960s for greater parental participation in the educational process.

> Some people argue that giving parents direct control over schools will reduce their feelings of powerlessness, i.e. alienation. As alienation decreases, there should be an increase in the attention that parents devote to schooling matters and the academic progress of their own children. This should lead to more active involvement on the parents' part and a subsequent increase in student performance.[2]

In some districts the outcome of this movement was legislatively mandated community board participation in the policy making process (as under New York City's 1970 decentralization law), while in other districts, the result was the creation of advisory boards and the opening up of communications channels between school and community. Some theorists and practitioners extended the concept from the participation of groups of parents in the decision-making process to the participation of individual parents in deciding what sort of education they considered appropriate for their child.

> Education vouchers seemed an appealing way to correct the balance of power in education, to reduce the sway of profes-

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sionals and increase the influence of parents. It was hoped that if parents could exercise free choice, schools would compete by undertaking new educational ventures, which would presumably succeed only if they truly reflected the wishes of the parents. The mere existence of competitors, it was reasoned, would weaken the monopoly in education by encouraging schools to be more responsive to the public.[3]

In 1972, with support from the federal government, Alum Rock, California, implemented a limited-voucher explanation plan based on this concept.

A third trend in education supporting multiple-option systems has been the search for voluntary desegregation mechanisms, which began after the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown* v. *Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. Initially, magnet school, or voluntary transfer desegregation plans, were seen (with ample justification) as strategies to avoid desegregation; and in the case of *Green* v. *New Kent County* (1968), the Supreme Court ruled that, while there was no inherent problem with the basic concept, such plans were not acceptable legal remedies when they did not bring adequate results. As court orders for desegregation increased, as delaying tactics were exposed, and as voluntary choice schools were introduced to meet other educational agendas, the use of magnet schools as a part of larger desegregation plans became more acceptable (although the underlying motivation—desegregation only when wanted—is unchanged). While many questions remain about the role of magnet schools and programs in the overall desegregation process, the federal courts have mandated, or recommended, the use of magnet options in a number of desegregation orders, and more and more school districts are including magnet programs as part of their desegregation plans.

The confluence of these three trends toward options in education has brought the concept of alternative schools from a fringe position well into the mainstream.

> A 1975 survey by the National School Boards Association found that twenty-eight percent of the districts responding had alternative schools in operation. *Over two-thirds of the districts with more than 25,000 students had alternative schools. . . .*[4]

The range of programs being offered either as the focus of an entire school, or as a specialization within a school is as varied as the districts in which they exist, though the following basic types of programs show up most frequently in some form: creative and performing arts, fundamental curriculum, ecological focus, open structured classes, schools without walls, career option and exploration programs. The International Consortium for Options in Public Education at the University of Indiana now publishes a catalog of the alternatives available within the U.S. public schools, and holds regular workshops and seminars to spur the development of new programs. Educators from alternative programs are looking to each other for new ideas on how to implement and improve the availability of alternative programs.

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Implications for Desegregation

The use of magnet schools or projects in the process of school desegregation still poses problems that are difficult to resolve. One or two, or even several magnet schools, no matter how racially balanced their individual student populations, are not sufficient to bring about district-wide desegregation. While the concept of the neighborhood schools is slowly weakening in the face of attractive nonlocal options, location is still an important factor in parental choice. This is especially true in those large, urbanized districts which have taken the magnet school concept to heart.

The New York Times of April 18, 1978, reported that the United States Court of Appeals rejected the school desegregation plan of the Dallas Independent School District. The Dallas plan relied heavily on the magnet school concept to stimulate voluntary desegregation, but the unevenness of the results left too many single-race schools unchanged. Earlier, in the fall of 1977, the Seattle School District decided to move from a voluntary magnet-based plan to a nonvoluntary plan even though it entailed a greater degree of busing. The reason for this change was Seattle's dissatisfaction with the degree of desegregation achieved under the voluntary plan.

Magnet programs can also have negative ramifications in a number of ways. If the magnet school attracts students away from nonmagnet schools to leave behind racially isolated schools, it clearly has complicated the very problem it was intended to solve. If there are difficulties attracting enough students from both minority and nonminority groups, and specifically racial methods are used to fill student places, the very core of the magnet concept is violated. What this has meant in several instances is that schools have had to operate below the desired enrollment level. It was considered preferable to turn away students from one group when there was an insufficient number in the other rather than to violate the fundamentally voluntary nature of the enrollment process.

Too, there is the very serious problem of resegregation within "racially balanced" schools. Magnet schools are particularly vulnerable to this problem. When several optional programs exist within one host school, one of the special options may become the preserve of the intellectually advantaged (most frequently white), while the other special program may be more attractive to those less intellectually prepared. Insensitive counseling of students may exacerbate this stratificatory tendency. Particularly in the case of career option and exploration programs, there is a need to design individual programs that can accommodate different levels of students, without automatically tracking the students into the various subspecialties. Even when there is a single focus, the danger for resegregation can occur in the skills classes, which are given in addition to the option-specific classes. In some magnet programs this problem is handled by teaching basic skills in nongraded classes and in hoping that the lesson that people are better or worse than each other in different areas will be learned from the school experience as a whole. Other

schools integrate the basic skills into the curriculum in such a way that, for example, students in the same theatrical technology class may be writing about what they are learning at different levels of competence. However the problem is handled, program designers need to be certain that students are not short-changed in the area of basic skills ("man cannot live by macramé alone") and that they are not resegregated in a way that undermines the integration which may occur elsewhere in the school.

Finally, when magnet schools are used as part of a larger desegregation plan, care must be taken that, because of their "special" nature, the magnet schools do not draw badly needed desegregation support services and attention from nonmagnet schools also in the process of desegregation.

Implications for Educational Equity

Multiple-option systems may also raise problems concerning the question of equity in educational services within a school district as a whole. While one of the critical characteristics of a magnet school is that it be distinctively different from other schools in order to attract students, some schools have experienced difficulty in developing their themes in so clear a fashion as to assure that this is their main attraction.

> If magnet schools are not distinctive, there is concern that they will become "superior," that is, schools that are "better than" nonmagnet schools in resources, educational quality and opportunity. In such cases, it is likely that students in nonmagnet schools would be denied equal opportunity.[8]

Because of the resources needed to develop the distinctiveness of a magnet school, and because of the energy and attention generated by "special" schools, it is easy for such schools to divert resources and attention from other schools in the district, exacerbating the quality differences that may already exist between magnet and nonmagnet schools. "We do not want to lead to a system of superior schools, well supported, attended by children of educationally enlightened parents versus poor schools, short on support, attended by everyone else."[9]

On a broader level, while there are strong positive reasons for supporting the development of magnet schools, there is the legitimate concern that magnet schools may in some cases be a fancy gimmick to grab public attention and divert public concern that educational conditions are not in fact being improved.

Implications for Social Mobility

Beyond desegregation or even diversification in education are the hopes of some education reformers that multiple-option systems may finally provide the key to equal educational opportunity. "If parents can control the educational choices which affect their children's future," the argument runs, "surely they can overcome the ways schools have tended to stereotype and stratify their children." This is unfortunately not the case. Without extensive preselection publicity, both general (broad coverage in print and in the media) and focused (direct communication in parent and community meetings), there is the danger that less-educated parents will not be adequately informed to make the best choices for their children's future. Even with adequate parent preparation, however, parental choices will tend to strengthen rather than attenuate socioeconomic patterns. This was predictable given what sociologists of education have learned about the relationship of social class to parental attitudes about education.[8] In studying parent choices in three multiple-option school districts, Bridge, Blackman, and Lopez-Morillas found that

> Different kinds of schools attracted different kinds of children, and parents' choices reflected their instrumental child rearing values. Working class families tended to emphasize obedience and respect for external authority, and their children were overrepresented in highly structured, traditional classrooms. In contrast, middle class families tended to emphasize independence, imaginativeness, and intellectual performance, and their children were overrepresented in less structured open classrooms.[9]

This finding conforms to Kohn's contention that parents try to pass on to their children the orientations and skills which the parents have learned in the workplace as necessary for success. Where working-class occupations require obedience to external authority, middle-class occupations often include tasks requiring people to make independent judgments with little direct supervision. The type of education a child receives will prepare him or her to function in some occupational settings better than others.

> In voucher school districts, parents can choose schools in order to affect the probabilities that their children will acquire specific class-related beliefs, attitudes, social competencies, and physical skills. It may be that parents' individual choices will result in greater classroom homogeneity in terms of social class and ability. . . . In short, schools will have even less of an impact (on social mobility) than they now have. To the extent that schools are supposed to foster social mobility, increasing family choice in schooling would appear, on the surface, to be counterproductive.[10]

Conclusions

While magnet schools and multiple-option school districts cannot bring about desegregation without the use of other mechanisms, and while there are clearly some pitfalls to be avoided in the development of multiple-option systems, several positive aspects of the growing number of magnet schools must be emphasized. First, they respond to a deeply felt need for alternatives to the standard curriculum in the public schools on the part of teachers, parents, and students. This has stimulated the development of programs tailored to fit local needs with local resources. While externally designed alternative programs can be and often are successfully adapted to community requirements, the locally designed programs have the added benefit of a sense of ownership and the development of innovative muscles.

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A second positive aspect of magnet schools is that they provide a wide variety of learning experiences to children, which cannot be available in a single-approach school district. As the variety of magnet schools grows, so also does the ability of school districts to deal with children who differ from the norm, whose learning styles or special interests mitigate against success in traditional schools.

In fact, perhaps the most positive aspect of the current boom in magnet schools is that the approach *legitimates diversity*. In a pluralistic society, one which no longer considers the discarding of cultural baggage as the prerequisite for membership, it is logically inconsistent to have a system of public education that conveys the message that one either learns to function in the dominant and accepted manner, or one fails. Particularly in the issue of racial integration, an appreciation for human differences as legitimate variance (as opposed to superiority and inferiority) will need to emerge before desegregation and the "numbers game" yields anything more than piecemeal remedial action for past injustice. Because magnet schools have the potential to bring students of different racial backgrounds together for reasons other than racial balance, they offer the possibility to emphasize what children have in common and to place them in peer situations in which they can meet each other based on mutual interest.

Notes

1. Mario D. Fantini, "History and Philosophy of Alternative Schools," in *Magnet Schools: Legal and Practical Implications*, ed. Nolan Estes and Donald R. Waldrip. (Piscataway, N.J.: New Century Corporation, 1978), p. 8.
2. Gary Bridge, Julie Blackman, and Martin Lopez-Morillas, "How Parents Choose Schools in Multiple Option Systems" (Paper delivered at American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, Calif. April 22, 1976), p. 3.
3. David K. Cohen and Eleanor Farrar, "Power to the Parents? The Story of Education Vouchers," *Public Interest* 48 (Summer 1977): 74,75.
4. Vernon H. Smith, "Educational Options: What's Happening Today?" in Estes and Waldrip, eds, *op.cit.*, p. 109.
5. Robert Barr, "Curricula for Magnet Schools" (Speech delivered at Magnet School Conference, New Orleans, January 21, 1978). Robert Barr is Director of the International Consortium for Options in Public Education, University of Indiana.
6. Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity (Massachusetts), "Magnet Schools and Programs" (Report to the Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education, January 24, 1978), p. 5.
7. Thomas Fagen, "Conditions for Funding Magnet Schools" (Speech delivered at Magnet School Conference, New Orleans, January 22, 1978. Thomas Fagen is Chief of Special Projects Branch, Equal Educational Opportunity Program, USOE).
8. See Melvin L. Kohn, *Class and Conformity: A Study in Values* (Homewood, Ill.: Irwin-Dorsey, 1969).
9. Bridge, Blackman, and Lopez-Morillas, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
10. Gary Bridge, "Citizen Choice in Public Services: Voucher Systems," in *Alternatives for Delivering Public Service: Toward Improved Performance*, ed. E. D. Savas (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, Inc., 1977).

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